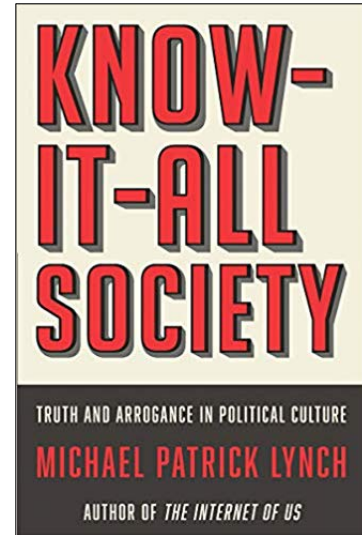


Michael Patrick Lynch, **Know-It-All Society: Truth and Arrogance in Political Culture**, New York, NY: Liveright Publishing Corporation 2019, 209 pp., \$26.95 (hardcover).

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With his publication of ***Know-It-All Society: Truth and Arrogance in Political Culture***, Michael Patrick Lynch has brought a good deal of illumination to various aspects of, as well as the reasons for, the divisiveness the United States has been experiencing in recent years and the negative impacts it has been having. Readers of the *International Journal of Communication* should find Lynch's analysis to be of particular interest, especially in light of the attention he devotes to the role that social media, in particular, have played in cultivating a widespread level of intellectual arrogance on different sides of the current political divide and an attendant disregard for the notion of objective truth and its discoverability.



In the Preamble, Lynch makes clear immediately the central concern of his book—namely, “how we should go about the business of acquiring and maintaining our political convictions” (p. 1). Our failure to do so has, in his view, significant existential consequences, not the least of which is a pronounced inability to know how to live as a result of not “taking seriously the question of how to believe” (p. 8). In one way or another, the six chapters that comprise *Know-It-All Society* address this question, with the final one focusing more specifically than any of the others on approaches to dealing with the problem. Throughout, Lynch frequently reminds the reader of the irony of having expansive access to information but a limited, if not shrinking, regard for what it reasonably serves to establish as acceptable bases for belief.

Chapter 1, “Montaigne’s Warning,” traces Lynch’s concern with our becoming a know-it-all society to the writings of 16th-century philosopher Michel de Montaigne relating to the dangers of intellectual arrogance, as well as to the ravages of social upheaval it led to during the times in which he lived. To cope with what he found to be this disturbing situation, Montaigne’s response was ultimately withdrawal from society. Although sharing Montaigne’s concern, Lynch finds withdrawal a not very effective means of addressing what arrogance of more recent vintage has done to shape current realities and that threaten to become even more invidious in the future. The concern is especially apropos in respect to the conditions of life in modern societies such as the United States possessing potentially limitless destructive capabilities.

Having explained and accounted for “Montaigne’s warning,” Lynch summarizes and illustrates some of the contemporary social scientific evidence relating to overconfidence, as well as feelings of both superiority and exclusion, and how they, in turn, contribute to the development of arrogance, even as such feelings are shown to be unwarranted. He goes on to establish how individual intellectual arrogance further fosters tribal arrogance, which beyond a certain threshold may contribute to dehumanization and the

unleashing of destructive potential in such a fashion that Montaigne felt can bring out "the worst in humanity" (p. 26).

Chapter 2, "The Outrage Factory," attends to ways in which communication technology has contributed to our perceptions of knowledgeability. Lynch begins with a discussion of what he labels "Google-know" (p. 27), which refers to an ever-increasing tendency to rely on a major search engine for both acquiring information and confirming what in many instances we already believe with little or no perceptible corresponding effort to assess what we locate in a way that would qualify as critical, let alone well reasoned or even reflective. He subsequently discusses how such tendencies contribute to heightened susceptibility to fake news as a basis for action; activate shared, often unhealthy, emotional arousal among like-minded individuals; and foster potentially dangerous behavior. To illustrate the point, Lynch uses the case of Edgar Welch, who bought into a conspiracy theory that Hillary Clinton and other Democratic politicians were operating a sex-trafficking ring out of the basement of a Washington, D.C. pizzeria and decided to liberate the hostages, of whom there were none. In fact, there was not even a basement in the establishment. Given the amount of emotional sharing that fake news activates, often via social media in particular, the notion of "claims justified by the evidence" can easily drop from consciousness among those who, as Lynch notes, "contribute, unwittingly, or otherwise, to a corrupted information culture" (p. 49).

In chapter 3, "Where the Spade Turns," Lynch considers reasons why the sort of insensitivity to facts and seeming anathema to critical thinking that he discusses in chapter 2 are increasingly in evidence. The answer to the question appears to reside in the tendency for beliefs and attitudes to give rise to convictions that, once formed, define our self-identity. As Lynch puts it, "A conviction is a commitment that reflects the kind of person we want to be" (p. 57). Hence, our convictions tend to be resistant to modification. Social media, as well as other communication technologies, can lead one to make such commitments blindly. When this occurs, a common consequence is the emergence of intellectual arrogance, which, in turn, can lead to a confusion of self-esteem with truth. Under these circumstances, a conviction/arrogance spiral can easily come into play. Such tendencies can and do eventuate in conditions under which many individuals become "vulnerable to being hijacked by those who feed off tribalism and transform conviction-inspired rage into an ideology of contempt and rage" (p. 74).

Lynch's analysis is much more intricate than the preceding synopsis might indicate. More important for purposes of this review, however, is that one come to appreciate intellectual arrogance as a social phenomenon that develops processually and in ways that illuminate our understanding of how some otherwise mystifying aspects of current political reality have emerged.

"Ideologies of Arrogance and the American Right," chapter 4 of *Know-It-All-Society*, focuses on how much of the material in the preceding three chapters applies to current aspects of political conditions in American life and in the ideology of the Right in particular. To accomplish this task, Lynch begins with a discussion of precursors of authoritarianism as it is playing out currently in the United States. To this end, he draws heavily on the insights of Hannah Arendt and what she saw as accounting for the rise of Nazism in Germany and the emergence of Hitler as supreme leader in the movement. The discussion accents the dual and simultaneous contribution of Hitler's cultivation of attitudes promoting "perceived superiority and defensive insecurity" (p. 77) among those who would become his subservient and unquestioning followers.

The continual cultivation of the two attitudes served effectively to promote the development of an ideology of arrogance, which, in turn, embraced both resentment and hate toward those to whom they felt themselves superior. Lynch sees some striking parallels in the behavior of President Trump and his enablers. The process of cultivation of such an ideology of arrogance, ignorance, and contempt in the latter case, however, has been substantially abetted by blindness-inducing uses of social media and related technologies. Lynch does much to make this observation clear.

Shifting attention to a different side of the political spectrum, in chapter 5, "Liberalism and the Philosophy of Identity Politics," Lynch addresses the tendency toward arrogance that many people perceive to exist among those who espouse "progressive political philosophy" (p. 104). He proceeds to tie this perception to identity politics and argues at some length that such an association reflects a basic misunderstanding of identity politics. More pertinent to the perceived imperiousness, from Lynch's perspective, is a confusion of the traditional liberal commitment to truth as both discoverable and accessible with "a commitment to one's own superiority" (p. 130). In the political realm, such confusion can lead to one's not taking opponents seriously, which is evident, in part, in the election of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency.

Often accompanying intellectual arrogance among liberals is, according to Lynch, its twin: contempt—an attitude from which it is manifestly more difficult to retreat than, say, such correlates as self-righteousness anger and resentment. The combination of arrogance and contempt renders unlikely any realistic prospects for the successful management of differences and the development of at minimum functional interpersonal relationships. In fact, it is almost a prescription for highly dysfunctional ones.

Having made clear what he sees as a critical concern about where the emergence of an increasingly know-it-all society may be taking us, Lynch directs readers' attention, in his final chapter, to ways in which we may be able to stem the burgeoning tide. Among the measures he explores are a recommitment to the Socratic method/attitude for assessing our convictions, the cultivation of a sense of greater intellectual humility, subscription to the Deweyesque notions of respect for others and reflection, and encouragement to adopt the view that "if something is true, it doesn't mean you'll believe it; and if you believe something, that doesn't mean it is true" (p. 169).

Lynch has written a work of considerable intellectual merit but that does not require a necessarily strong background in the scholarly and philosophical literature on which he draws. He fails to address, however, what implementation of his suggestions and recommendations entails, or where the locus of leadership properly resides. The absence of such commentary notwithstanding, one can presume that he has in mind not only those who read his book but also others with whom they, in turn, may share his views. Ideally, his thinking about the serious concerns he raises will achieve voice and dissemination initially through formal educational channels in the expectation that it ultimately will reach a substantially larger audience as a consequence of how those who study what Lynch has to say model in their own behavior in their interactions with others. Let us hope so, as there otherwise may not be a great deal of time before the warning that Montaigne sounded and that inspired the present work will serve to prevent the worst of what intellectual arrogance can bring about.